

The Plight of the Homeless

In one of Douglas Adams' very silly books, Zaphod Beeblebrox, the egocentric two-headed president of the universe, is condemned to undergo the ordeal of the Total Perspective Vortex. It is an excruciating form of torture that exposes the criminal to a sense of the infinite size of the universe and his own small place in it. The result is the annihilation of the self. The device was designed by a scientist who got tired of his wife telling him to put things in perspective. The nagging wife might just as well have been Adam Smith or William Godwin or any one of the liberal philosophers who insist that we look at ourselves as an impartial spectator or extraterrestrial would.

Liberals preach perspective, Epicureans advise indifference to friends and nation, and Buddhists long for Nirvana. Today, it is principally Christians who insist on a sense of place. Our universe is filled with special places: This earth, to which God deigned to send His Son; the land of Judea, where He was born; Galilee, which He regarded as home; the cities of the Greeks that gave us our civilization; and Rome, still the *urbs aeterna*, the seat of an empire of which our world, so full of itself and little else, is the merest afterthought.

When most of us think of place, however, it is not Rome or Bethlehem we have in mind but the place we came from. But how many of us live in the town, much less the home, in which we grew up? In American towns like Rockford or Charleston, to name only two of the places in which I have lived, the bright and ambitious are expected to move off to Chicago or Atlanta, or, better still, New York or Los Angeles. Small towns, even small cities, are for the losers, and Garrison Keillor may continue to bleat, in adenoidal tones, his saccharine tales of Lake Wobegone, but it is from the safe distance of St. Paul, New York, and Scandinavia.

John Crowe Ransom attributed much of America's cultural and spiritual malaise to the refusal to settle down, and it is true that many of the great American heroes have been drifters: Christopher

Columbus, Capt. John Smith, Daniel Boone, Johnny Appleseed, to say nothing of Charles Lindbergh and Alan Shepherd, who are known principally for their dramatic exits from America. Americans, as we learned in school so long ago, were hardy adventurers who packed a Bible, a spare shirt, and two chickens and headed off, in search of adventure, to the New World.

This theme, however, has been overplayed. Outside of fairy tales and Arthurian romances, few men are foolish enough to go on quests. Most of our ancestors were near the end of their ropes—in a few cases, this was literally true—and they were looking for cheap land and the opportunity to make a fresh start. Once they arrived, they quickly put down roots. Although some hardy Celts pushed off to the Appalachian frontier, most settlers who had good land held on to it. We like to think of America as a youthful country, but, by the time of the Revolution, Englishmen had been living in Virginia for nearly 170 years, and many leaders of the rebellion—Washington and Jefferson, the Adamses, the Rutledges and Laurenses—were deeply rooted in the soil of Virginia, Massachusetts, and Carolina.

The exceptions, perhaps, prove the rule: The displaced Yankee rake Ben Franklin and that tax-collector without a country Tom Paine. Both of them were afflicted with the Enlightenment fantasies of objective rationalism that have done so much to undermine the sense of place and loyalty our ancestors brought with them from Old Europe. Men of the late 18th century, following the philosophers, were learning to liberate themselves from prejudice and superstition, as they called tradition and religion, and to see the universe not as the Creation of a God Who made the world and saw that it was good but as a vast mechanical system in which the place of man was very small, and the place of the individual man infinitesimal.

Enthusiasts for the French Revolution were no longer interested in improving a single nation. Democracy in one nation was reactionary. The true radicals, like Paine and his friend Anacharsis

Clootz, had to be citizens of the world. Clootz, proclaiming the "nullity of nations," headed the foreign delegation to the French National Assembly. As an Hébertiste, he suffered the penalty his party would have inflicted on much of France. His buddy Paine narrowly escaped the same fate and died in America, one of his many homelands. His demise in Greenwich Village seems to have cursed the place to this day and made it the natural home of bad painters and worse writers. Paine was buried in unconsecrated ground on his own farm, but his archnemesis William Cobbett, in a fit of uncharacteristic and inappropriate generosity, had the corpse dug up and brought to England for burial in a patriotic monument he intended to construct. Since Britain refused to rescind the order of outlawry passed upon a disloyal subject, the bones of the wandering tax man had to pass into the hands of a receiver. *Sic semper omnibus rerum novarum molitoribus!*

Even Tom Paine grew tired of his life as perpetual revolutionary and represented himself as a respectable American man of property. There are even stories that he repented of his atheism on his deathbed. What did he have to lose? Young men are thrilled to discover that their parents and ancestors are wrong on all the essentials, but, as the blood cools and they no longer think themselves immortal, they begin to hear the sad old music, reminding them how briefly they walk upon the earth, how faint are the footprints they leave. "Why ask after my ancestry?" is Glaucus' famous reply to Diomedes in the *Iliad*. "Like leaves blowing in the winter wind are the generations of men."

Glaucus, wise beyond his young years, is not taking time in the midst of a battle to inform his Greek enemy of the obvious fact that generations are born and pass away. Our situation is more humiliating than that. This entire generation passes away, scattered by the winds of time, until, in three generations, no one is left to remember what we looked like or what our voices sounded like. In another generation, we cease even to be a family anecdote. Our place in

the scheme of things, if looked at from a sufficiently enlightened perspective, is nowhere.

Glaucus, however, was not enlightened. Although Homer's Achaeans had a gloomy view of the afterlife, they did celebrate the deeds of their ancestors and worshipped the gods of their native places. Despite the melancholy tone of Glaucus' question, he does remember six generations back to the grandfather of his namesake, who was his own great-grandfather. Like the Romans and many Christians today, Greeks paid tribute to their dead ancestors in religious ceremonies that served to consecrate the house. Until the philosophers taught educated Greeks to think in universal terms, the citizen of a *polis* was rooted in the sacred soil of Attica or Boeotia and, if he was attentive, knew the names of the gods and *daimones* of every hill and spring.

Early Romans were, if anything, more reverent, and it would be the work of a lifetime to memorize the names of every little god who presided over the first plowing, the second plowing, the sowing, weeding, harvesting, storing—to say nothing of the malicious spirits who inflicted the plants with mold or rust or weevils. A medieval European peasant had almost as many neighborhood saints and martyrs as a Greek or Roman peasant, and these mysterious and friendly powers, commemorated in rustic shrines and local festivals and in carved stone and stained glass within the church, made the landscape bristle with energy and meaning. Now the festivals are put on for the tourists who visit the church in busloads, and, where the glass has not been broken, its stories are forgotten.

Every civilized society goes through a phase of "enlightenment," and some, if they are lucky, survive it. The sophists of the fifth century B.C. taught their students that man is the measure of all things, that values are conventional and not rooted in nature, that we know nothing of the gods, that might makes right. Socrates, although a genuinely irritating man in many respects, saw the problem being created by atheism and moral relativism, but neither he nor his best student Plato understood the danger inherent in their own tendency to treat political and social life in abstract and universal terms. Plato's *Republic* might just as well have been called

Utopia. Aristotle, fortunately, has provided the permanent corrective to the Socratic moral heresies, but it was not the students of Aristotle who dominated the later Greek approach to politics but the Epicureans, who taught men to feign interest but cultivate indifference to their local community, and the Stoics, who preached the doctrine of world citizenship. Although both schools were to have pernicious effects during the Enlightenment, the Romans converted Stoicism into a pragmatic, albeit austere, creed of duty. The emperor Marcus—who divided himself into, on the one hand, universal man and, on the other, a particular Roman born into a certain family—is a long way from the Phoenician confidence man who founded the school.

Good character and good intentions can partially convert a philosophical sow's ear into a silk purse. Look how Jefferson sidestepped his own nonsensical theory of natural rights when it was a question of defending Virginia. The Enlightenment that infected Jefferson, like the sophistic movement in fifth-century Greece, entailed a rejection of the particular and local in favor of the universal, of the sacred and mysterious in favor of the secular and rational. Demystification, like so many other bright ideas, sounds better in the morning than it does in the dead of night. If my poor human life cannot be given meaning by tradition and ritual, then I shall carve out my own destiny, like Robespierre or Napoleon or Mussolini, and, if nations will not obey me, there is the heroic road taken by the fictional Raskolnikov or the all-too-real serial killers who have cut such a swathe through our post-Christian world.

Most Americans, hell-bent on success, do not dream of conquering nations or murdering our neighbors. Our vast ambitions are defined by bigger cars, bigger houses, bigger blondes. In John Huston's *Key Largo*, when Rocco the gangster (Edward G. Robinson) is asked what he wants, he does not know how to answer until Humphrey Bogart tells him, "I know what you want. You want more." More is the creed of a lost people. "He who dies with the most toys wins," reads a sign I used to see in expensive tackle shops. Like children piling up stuffed animals on the bed, we think our toys can shield us from the great emptiness we really believe in, and, even if we go to church, it is neither a great cathedral

built to the greater glory of God nor a humble chapel where the faithful pray. No, our churches must have big-screen TV's and youth choirs waving their arms as they bellow loud commercial music that might be used to advertise the bogus beer we drink. Some of us demand song-and-dance numbers more appropriate to the midway of a county fair, and we expect to be told our Christian duty by wavy-haired, tooth-capped preacherboys who could fill in for one of the Chippendales—anything to distract us from the thought that we are going to die alone, and no matter how pretty the plot we have chosen in the "memorial garden," our corpse is one plant that is not going to come up again in the spring. In thinking that pagan thought, we have already made our existence Hell, but we have not even the pagan comfort of thinking that our flimsy afterlife will be consoled, once or twice a year, by ritual prayer and feeding administered by descendants who are both pious and a little bit afraid.

I am saying nothing that has not been said before by the Agrarians, and by Pound and Eliot.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter
dawn,
A crowd flowed over London
Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had un-
done so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were
exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before
his feet.

Dante's vision of Hell has become Eliot's London. Eliot was going mad as he wrote *The Waste Land*. He found some sanity in joining the Church of England and in becoming a kind of English patriot, as the local references in the *Four Quartets* suggest.

For many of us who have spent our lives moving and traveling, it is too late to put down deep roots in the soil of California—or of Illinois, on whose people and identity Edgar Lee Masters long ago pronounced the eulogy. We can do our best, however, to love the places in which we find ourselves or to move to places we can learn to love, knowing that all such particular and partial loves are preparation for the full love we shall only know when we finally make our way home to where we belong. c